

SUCCESS OR SIGNIFICANCE

MARK 6: 14-29

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University Church of Chicago

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That wonderful Catholic Christian novelist/short story writer/storyteller from Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor wrote, *"There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment."*

At first glance, the story of the beheading of John the Baptist does not reveal a moment in which the presence of grace can be felt. The story Mark tells us is stark, evil and grotesque. It is a text of terror. Herod Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, who ruled the Galilee after his father's death, was notorious among the Jews for his contempt of their religious practices. He built his capital city, Tiberias, on an ancient burial ground, which rendered the city ritually unclean to religiously observant Jews. Many Jews shunned the place and Herod filled his capital with Gentiles and elite, nonreligious Jews.

So, when Herod heard about Jesus and the rumors about his identity—some were saying that he was John the Baptizer raised from the dead or he was Elijah, the long-expected prophet whose return would mark the end of the age—Herod declared, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Through an extended flashback, Mark tells the story. Herod had put John in prison at the urging of Herodias, the former wife of his brother, Philip, with whom he, Herod had an adulterous affair that resulted in her divorce and subsequent marriage to Herod. If this sounds like "Desperate Housewives," well, it was even more complicated and devious. The scandalous relationship had been preached against by John the Baptizer who told Herod to his face, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Herodias, as Mark says, "had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not" (v. 19). Herod was afraid of John, "knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him" (v. 20). Like many such secular, non-religious people, Herod was perplexed by John, and "he liked to listen to him."

Thus, it is not too far-fetched to imagine Herod going down into the dungeon where John was imprisoned to have conversations with him, to listen to the one person in his world who did not fear him and who would speak truth—however wounding it might be—to him.

So, there John languishes in what was nothing more than a deep, dark, dank hole, imprisoned by a man whom Mark calls King Herod, the title the ruler desperately wanted which the Romans would not grant. He wanted to be like his daddy, to be called "King of the Jews," but he was consigned to being nothing more than the procurator of Galilee. Still, the position carried all kinds of wealth and perks.

When Herod threw a huge party to celebrate his birthday, he invited his courtiers and officers and the secular leaders of Galilee. For the evening's entertainment, his stepdaughter, Salome, came in and danced for the guests. This dance, this moment has been depicted as one of the most erotic moments in history. Oscar Wilde wrote a play about Salome and Sarah Bernhart danced the Dance of the Seven Veils in Paris. Richard Strauss wrote an opera about her, and a Hollywood Western film tied its story loosely to the frontier town of Salome, Arizona. Herod was apparently so aroused by the dance that he "swore" to Salome that "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

The girl went to her mother for advice about her answer. Herodias told her to ask for the head of John the Baptizer. So, she added a fillip to the request when she went back to the ruler, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (v. 25). A moment filled with both honor and grief ensued. Herod could not back down without losing face, but to behead the Baptizer caused him immense pain.

So, John was beheaded, the head was brought to the girl who gave it to her mother.

The main actor in the drama, Herod, is weak, too little capable of self-knowledge to be called a tragic figure. He is trying to negotiate myriad complicated relationships within his household and within the Galilee. He wants desperately to please everyone but still be able to uphold his personal standards. He is caught between the adulterous demands of his wife and the ethical demands of the Baptizer. He is eager to appear a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilean society. Herod is quite conscious of how the demands of leadership shape one's possibilities, yet he is also seeking some measure of truth by which to guide his choices.

It is not too dissimilar from being pastor of a church. The sticky web of congregational politics coupled with the demands of different constituencies and some very angry people make it very difficult to negotiate issues and serve the spiritual and moral needs of a congregation. Even the most spiritually centered and capable pastor can become demoralized by congregants determined to push a personal agenda which they hold sacred. The church too easily capitulates to the vociferous demands of some individual or group in order to keep peace.

What ever happened, I sometimes ask myself, to the example of Jesus? Isn't the church the one place in the world where you can expect to find forgiveness and grace, the place where people take seriously the commands of Our Lord to turn the other cheek and go the second mile and give more than is expected?

At three o'clock in the morning, when, as F. Scott Fitzgerald used to say, it is always the dark night of the soul, it is easy for us to allow our failures to add up to failure. It is easy for us to think our lives notable only for the wrongs we have done, especially to those we love, the sadness we have caused, and the sorry circumstances of our lives.

Years ago I visited the Waterford factory where some of the world's finest glass is made. Every finished piece that arrives gleaming from the hands of those who created it is held up to a fierce, bright light and examined for imperfections. If even the slightest flaw is detected, the glass is smashed. If it is not perfect it is rejected. There are no Waterford seconds.

Now that may be a useful method of ensuring flawless glass, but it's no way to treat a life. To claim to speak absolute truth is to be self-deceived, guilty of both arrogance and foolishness. If we have any knowledge of our own heart, we must know that even when our love is at its best, at its deepest, purest, fiercest, it expresses not only a genuine care for those we cherish but also our self-regarding interests, needs and appetite. We love other not for their sake only, but also for our own. Yeats wrote to Ann Gregory:

I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.

G. K. Chesterton mocked our pretensions of perfection by announcing that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly. He saves us from our despair in an astonishing way—but making a high use of the doctrine of original sin. He calls it “the only cheerful doctrine,” for it tells us that nothing is as it should be. It is not merely that we disappoint others. We disappoint ourselves. Chesterton has a word for those of us who think we must always be at our best. He tells us that if all we can offer is our best, we are not offering enough, for our best is only a very small part of us. If I were to offer this congregation my best preaching, I would probably preach about one Sunday in seven. A number of you would say one in ten. What should I do on Sundays when I am not at my best? Should I not show up?

Our failures are no surprise to God, for God never expected us to be perfect. We are not accepted by God because we are perfectly acceptable. We are accepted because we are perfectly loved. Or, as Paul Tillich so cogently said, “We must accept the fact that we are accepted even though we are unacceptable.”

The Gospels never promise us a rose garden, and least of all does the Gospel of Mark nourish any hopes for easy discipleship. In Mark the court of Herod, like the Sanhedrin and Pilate's court, is viewed with the cold eye of realism. The ruler's good intentions are engulfed by ambition, fear, envy and compromise. God's faithful witness, the Baptizer, becomes a victim.

The importance of the text lies in the way it links the initial message of the Twelve to the death of John the Baptist, just as the initial preaching of Jesus was linked to John's arrest (14). Moreover, Herod's affection for John is paralleled in Pilate's favorable impressions of Jesus. Both wished to please the crowd by a gesture of magnanimity; both were manipulated to carry out the deadly hostility of a third party. Both, seemingly in control, become unwilling actors in a drama beyond their control.

One way to read this story, then is in terms of success versus significance. Success, as the world measures it, is seen in Herod and his advisers, the military commanders, the leading people of the country. They are the ones who can afford leisure and pleasure. They can get what they want when they want it.

John the Baptist, alone in his dungeon cell, doomed and helpless to save his life, appears in shocking contrast to the people in the palace at Herod's birthday party. Our minds are perpetually and perversely fascinated by the wealth, power and intrigue of the courts of the Herods. Yet the significance of the story lies in the death of that strange prophet called John. The Gospel invites us to look what we call success—and then choose significance as we follow Jesus.